

Remembering MYM Stalwart Haroon Patel

(Mphutlane wa Bofelo)

On 13 September 2002, the first school in Lenasia – aptly called Alpha Primary School – officially named its hall after a former student, Haroon Patel. The hall was opened by the then Deputy Minister of Education, Dr Mosibudi Mangena, a comrade and close associate of Bantu Stephen Biko – the founding father of the Black Consciousness Movement. It is the poetic justice of history – and God’s will – rather than just a coincidence that the function took place a day after the anniversary of the martyrdom of Stephen Biko, and that this honour on Haroon Patel was bestowed by a school with a proud and great historical legacy.



Haroon Patel (centre) with Cyril Ramaphosa and Mohamed Valli Moosa

Having been removed from Kliptown in 1957, the community whose children attended Alpha has produced a galaxy of students who became prominent academic, political, cultural and social activists. Student activism in Lenasia witnessed an upsurge in October 1977, a momentous month in South African politics. It followed the national students’ uprisings that started in Soweto on 16 June 1976, the killing of Bantu Stephen Biko in detention; the crackdown on Black Consciousness (BC) organisations and the banning of three publications: *The World*, the *Weekend World* and *La Verite* on 19 October 1977.

In Lenasia, where political activity had been disrupted by the arrest of the BC leaders, Haroon Patel, together with Anjeni Poonan, Rooha Variava and others, mobilised students and organised a protest meeting to register outrage at the banning of organisations and the murder of Biko. When students gathered at the

venue for the meeting, the owner of the hall could not be found, and Haroon Patel began to address the students outside the hall. Some weeks earlier, the state had already declared all open-air gatherings illegal and the students felt that the absence of the hall's owner was a deliberate set-up to force them to hold the meeting in the open. Haroon had barely begun to speak when scores of police stormed the gathering, beating students and assaulting many, including young girls.

The police had effectively sealed off the venue, and no one was able to escape. The protesters were taken to Protea Magistrate's Court where they were processed before being moved to the Johannesburg city centre. They were locked up in cells, charged and released after having spent three nights in jail and having pleaded guilty. Some of the people who had participated in the protest meeting suffered severe consequences. Linda Moonsamy, Haroon Bera, Hassen Lorgat and nine others, who had been enrolled at the Transvaal Indian College of Education in Fordsburg, were expelled. Teacher and MYM member Yousuf Cajee, who had been one of three adults at the meeting, suffered from persistent harassment by the education department. (The other adults were Yusuf Nazir, another MYM member and former *Al-Qalam* editor, and journalist Boeti Eshak.)

For Haroon – a hafiz of the Qur'an – this was the beginning of a long life of struggle, selfless sacrifice and an unflinching fight for justice. Having earlier joined the Lenasia Student Movement – an affiliate of the BC-aligned South African Students' Movement (SASM), Haroon joined the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO) upon its formation in 1978 and served in several leadership positions including branch chairperson and national general secretary. He represented AZAPO at the National Forum Committee and also later at the Conference for a Democratic Future. In this period, he was also detained twice under Section 10 of the Internal Security Act and held at Diepkloof Prison.

Anver Randera, a BC stalwart, said, 'Haroon was an activist who always loved organising and working on the ground level but was able to lead in different positions. As a Hafiz, whenever afforded the opportunity to address the congregation, he spoke on the struggle for liberation and the need for Muslims to be part of that struggle. He was an easy going and friendly person who tried to be accommodating to others. He also had a certain charm and charisma and was the vibrant voice and spokesperson of several activities and campaigns of AZAPO, including active protests that formed part of the campaign for international sporting and cultural isolation of apartheid South Africa, and was later active in the Anti-Tricameral Campaign and Anti-SAIC campaign and was active in the secretariats that set up various community projects.'

Haroon married Zaiboon, another AZAPO activist and they had two daughters, Ferial and Tasneem. The lack of the participation of established Muslim institutions in the

struggle aimed towards justice and equality for all – and the tacit endorsement of status quo by many in Muslim community, saw Haroon move out of the Muslim circles and, by the beginning of the 1980s, leave Islam.

Former MYM president Na'eem Jeenah said that Haroon had told him that one of the incidents that had pushed him away from the Muslim community and Islam was Haroon's attendance at an MYM halqa in 1977 or 1978. 'Haroon, at this time, was all fired up with the passion and activism of the anti-apartheid struggle. He suggested at the halqa that the MYM – and Muslims more generally – should get involved in the struggle. The response from most members present was that he should not raise political issues in the halqa. He did not return.' In fact, Na'eem said, in the next few years Haroon actively discouraged African youth in the BCM from considering converting to Islam.

Despite this, president of the Socialist Party of Azania and a former colleague of Haroon in AZAPO, Lybon Mabasa, said, 'Haroon's commitment to justice remained anchored on Islamic principles...When Haroon joined AZAPO, everyone knew Haroon as a devout and practising Muslim. I believe it was his religious belief that landed him into AZAPO or, rather, his faith found resonance with the Black Consciousness teachings and practices. He became first an important leader in the Lenasia branch of AZAPO. In 1982, after the slaughter of Palestinians in Lebanon, Comrade Haroon was a key organiser of protest actions against the murderous Israeli regime.'

Mabasa added, 'Haroon had an insatiable appetite for freedom and was willing to work for it. When other leaders of our movement were unable to travel overseas, he was among the first people to open international doors for AZAPO, and he was an uncompromising socialist. The international links that we have today were set up through the fearless efforts of Comrade Haroon. He was there when the International Liaison Committee of Workers and People was set up and also the reproclamation of the Fourth International. In 1989, when some of us were restricted, Comrade Haroon became a key organiser in the BCM for the Conference for a Democratic Future. He organised thousands of BC activists throughout the country to attend. When the organisations were unbanned, AZAPO had one month to organise a national congress and Comrade Haroon played a major role in organising the largest ever congress ever of AZAPO at Shareworld. More than 15 000 delegates and supporters attended.'

Soon after the formation of the Workers' Organisation for Socialist Action in 1990, Haroon left AZAPO to join WOSA which promoted a more socialist agenda.

Not long thereafter, Haroon became close to certain MYM members, especially as a result of the efforts of Johannesburg MYM member Muhammad Coovadia. By 1992

he had returned to Islam and joined the MYM, left his job in insurance sales and began working for the Movement. His brief period in the MYM – between 1992 and his death in 2005 – saw Haroon make enormous contributions to the Movement.

As an MYM fundraiser, he utilised the links and skills he had developed as a BCM activist and brought with him the spirit of translating ideas and theories into hard work on the ground and active participation in the daily struggles of people at the grassroots. After Haroon's death, Na'eem – who had worked closely with Haroon in those last years – recalled that Haroon had taken the option of not realising his 'full potential' through writing books, papers and articles but preferred hard work in the service of humanity. 'This was reflected in Haroon's willingness to do the most "menial" of tasks, even – or especially – if nobody else was willing to. I remember that he chose to paste election posters on boards rather than speaking at a public meeting; he chose to drive in the wee hours of the morning to transport MYM members to the airport rather than spending the time writing.'

Haroon almost single-handedly raised the funds for the purchase of a house in Mayfair, Johannesburg, to serve as offices for the MYM. The office later also served as the studio and office for The Voice radio station. Finding himself in the midst of a controversy regarding MYM women insisting on their right to space in the 23rd Street Mosque in Fietas, Haroon passionately defended the organisation and its female activists. This led to him to propose, at the 1993 MYM General Assembly, that the Movement form a national 'gender desk', and he nominated Shamima Shaikh to be its first national coordinator. He also played a central role in the Muslim Forum on Elections formed by the MYM in 1994 and travelled through the old Transvaal province doing voter education and organising discussions within the Muslim community on the upcoming elections. At a very hectic time in the life of the Movement, Haroon proved to be a pillar of strength, a strategic and tactical mind and an effective networker. His death in a motor car accident later in 1994 left MYM members stunned and at a loss in numerous ways.

The Qur'an assures us that those who die in the service of Allah and on the path of justice will not die in vain. This is certainly true for Haroon Patel. His legacy will live forever. This fact finds resonance in the words of Mabasa. 'If today we say we are socialists and we are internationalists,' he said, 'what we mean is that we are building on what Comrade Haroon started. The legacy of Dr Abu Baker Asvat of working and building in the Black communities is also the legacy of Comrade Haroon. One cannot mention Black Consciousness and AZAPO without remembering the role played by Comrade Haroon.' Similarly, despite Haroon's brief sojourn in the MYM, we can sincerely say that his sterling contributions were such that it is also impossible to talk about the MYM of the political transition of the 1990s without mentioning Haroon's name. And it is impossible to talk of the history of the

MYM Gender Desk without discussing Haroon's role in establishing it and supporting its development. He will forever live in our hearts.

(Source: Muslim Youth Movement's 40th Anniversary Magazine)